

Taming The Spy

By

Vanessa Liebe

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Chapter 1

April 1785 London

"My dear. I want you to locate two spies for me."

Lady Arabella Willoughby felt the usual stir of excitement at the prospect. At last. Another mission. She looked across the large desk at her spymaster and tried to contain her eagerness. It wasn't yet apparent how involved she would be.

"Of course, my lord."

Then she sat there, impatient, desperate to hear more. But Lord Coleridge enjoyed being exasperating. He liked to make her wait before divulging all of the details.

Intelligent grey eyes regarded her for a moment. "You are a most enlightened young lady and I am aware that you keep abreast of the current European political situation."

"I am - despite it being frowned upon." She agreed, with a twitch of her lips. Thank goodness, there were men like Lord Coleridge, who valued intelligent women. She proceeded to coolly summarize what was indeed happening in Europe. "England and France are heavily in debt after the American War of Independence. There is unrest in both countries, with the possibility of revolt if not contained. Then there is Prussia and Austria at odds over leadership of Germany."

Coleridge nodded, gave an appreciative smile, then became grave. "In other words, it is essential that we gather as much intelligence as we can from those countries."

Arabella frowned. She thought Lord Coleridge had wanted her to locate spies here in England, not go abroad.

"I already have people in place, gathering information," he assured her, noticing her confusion. "It is from one of my agents in France that I discovered two spies are coming here."

Arabella leaned forward in her seat. "Do we know where they'll land, my lord?"

"Portsmouth. My informant believes they will be a man and woman travelling as man and wife."

Intrigued, she waited for more.

He relented and told her. "As we are currently at peace with France, some of their engineers have come here to study. Unfortunately, it offers an opportunity for them to spy. I believe the two

spies coming to Portsmouth will meet up with some of these engineers and collect their intelligence."

Arabella sighed. "It's an effective way of wandering around, gleanng naval information, isn't it?"

"Indeed, my dear. However, these engineers can't gain access to High Society where the political information can be best obtained. After the two spies have gathered their intelligence in Portsmouth, they will eventually have to travel to London, as they will need to infiltrate the Ton."

So, where was her part in all this? Arabella simply had to ask the question. "What exactly do you want me to do, Lord Coleridge?"

He smiled. "I was just coming to that."

He was certainly taking his sweet time. He was a dear man, one could say almost a father figure to her, but he did like to tease. She tried not to grind her teeth.

"I want you to travel to Portsmouth in disguise and work in an inn where we suspect the spies will stay. Once they arrive, I want you to send word to me, while keeping an eye on them. If they meet up with anyone, I want you to observe that meeting and eavesdrop if you can."

Arabella nodded.

"Use plenty of disguises. We can't underestimate these agents and we don't want them becoming suspicious because they keep seeing the same person within their vicinity."

"Of course. I know." Besides, she loved being different people. It was half the fun. Dangerous – that went without saying – but thrilling too.

"Will I be working with anyone else?"

Usually she worked alone, but she was supposed to keep an eye on two spies and they may go out separately, which meant she could only follow one.

There was a pause. Then: "When you have notified me they are there, I will send a male agent to join you."

Arabella's head shot up. "Who?" she blurted. "I mean. Do I get to know?"

Lord Coleridge shook his head. "I protect my agents at all costs, my dear. If you were to be caught by these spies in the meantime and tortured, it's best you cannot give any other names."

She gulped. That was brutal and tough to hear. But she could understand the necessity.

"However, the innkeeper, Thomas Wilson, is an ex-agent of mine. He will aid you in any way he can, including giving you a room and providing you with work in various roles around his

inn. Once my other agent arrives at the inn, it is Thomas who will point him in your direction. I then want you to work together and follow the spies wherever they go. I believe that when they come to London they will blackmail, or coerce a member of the aristocracy into helping them gain admittance to events hosted by High Society. Or, they may even know someone already."

Arabella frowned. "Are you aware of anyone betraying England?"

"No, but amongst the elite there is always someone with pockets to let. Gold is a powerful incentive."

"Yes," she sighed. "I suppose it is."

"Which is why I want to know who helps them. You are to observe and follow the spies everywhere, along with your fellow agent. You can be yourselves at social gatherings."

"And in the end, will they be arrested?"

"No, my dear."

"No?"

He gave a calculating smile. "Once we know everything, we will use their accomplice to feed them false information and let them leave for France. My agents abroad will ensure that only the information we want to be relayed is given. If not, the spies will suffer a sudden accident."

Arabella crossed her fingers for luck. This was certainly going to be an intense, long, and interesting mission. Better than any ball or house party that was for certain. "What about any information they try to send from Portsmouth after meeting with any engineers?"

"I want you and your co-agent to intercept it."

Lord Coleridge made it sound so easy. Arabella nodded. "Fine. And then what do we do with it?"

He smiled. "The fellow I'll send is an expert at opening letters. Depending on the contents it will continue on its destination re-sealed, or it will be substituted for false, but believable information. He's also a code breaker, so between you, you ought to be able to decipher any code used."

Arabella was now thoroughly curious as to who would be joining her. He sounded quite fascinating, but she knew better than to ask again about him. Maybe the agent could teach her some new skills, like opening post without detection. She hoped he would be willing to do so. She liked the sound of that.

"When do I go to Portsmouth?"

"Immediately. The carriage is outside. Arrangements have been made and your absence already explained. I expect the French to arrive in the next few days." He pushed two pieces of paper across the desk to her. "These are their likeness, drawn by my agent in Paris, although they will be disguised."

Arabella took them. Then stood up ready to leave. "May I enquire what it is that has me hightailing it from London?"

"You're visiting a sick relative, my dear. Simple and plausible explanations work best."

"And do these French spies have names?"

"Henri Brochand and Camille Fouché are their real names. The names they are travelling to England under, I hope to know very soon and will get the information to you in Portsmouth."

She gave a rueful shake of her head, bid goodbye and left Whitehall.

Arabella was helped into the carriage waiting outside for her. Inside it was impeccable, designed for comfortable travel. But on the outside it was shabby and unnoticeable. She noticed her bag of disguises on the seat beside her. Lord Coleridge had thought of everything. She leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes. Her adventure had begun. Which was a good thing. For her godmother, though lovely and well meaning, was determined to find Arabella a husband this year. It was good to get away.

Arabella didn't want to marry. Well, not yet anyway. No gentleman appealed and she enjoyed her freedom. As a wealthy heiress, she had the funds to finance an independent life. Since a fire had wiped out most of her family five years ago, she lived with her younger brother in the fashionable part of town. However, her godmother had taken it upon herself to chaperone Arabella to all the social gatherings, and become increasingly frustrated with her godchild as Arabella refused to consider any of the suitors found for her.

"If only most of the men weren't so boring, or worse, conceited," she muttered, looking out of the carriage window.

There were plenty of handsome men among the Social Elite – not that looks were everything, but not one made her pulse race. And if Arabella was to finally marry in order to have the children she did desire, she wanted a husband who made her pulse race, damn it.

"Scandalous of me I know," she told the passing countryside on a sigh. "But I refuse to lay there like a sack of potatoes. I want to enjoy the marital bed."

Not that she had a clue what the sex act was like, for she hadn't so much as been kissed properly. However, she did have married friends who sometimes forgot she was unmarried when they discussed their husbands and what they got up to in bed. Instead of being appalled, Arabella found it fascinating, especially as her friends had ignored their own mother's advice which was to lie back while their spouse did his duty.

Arabella shivered. She couldn't think of anything worse than simply lying there while someone took her without any feelings involved. She wanted to participate in the act fully when it came to it. She wanted those hot kisses and delicious tingles her friends spoke of. *The question is, does the man exist who can arouse such passion in me?*

Arabella didn't think there was.

* * *

He had been summoned to Whitehall by Lord Coleridge and he couldn't be more relieved.

At last. A new mission to take him away from estate matters and the marriage mart. Lord, he hated attending all the balls, musicales and house parties. Yet, that was now his role: Cameron Blakeney, the Marquis of Lavenham had to fulfil the expectations of his title. He grimaced. The last four years had seen him dodging every match-making mama throwing a daughter his way. These women were shameless, relentless. They tried to set him up in compromising situations with their offspring to force his hand. So much so that Cameron turned up late to soirees and stayed of short duration.

Cameron knocked on the spymaster's door and entered.

"Good morning, Cameron."

"Good morning, James."

The two men had known each other for years and Cameron was glad that at least here in this office he could be an ordinary man again.

"How's the estate?"

"Flourishing," Cameron told the older man with pride. "Despite personal circumstances, my father managed everything with great efficiency. I barely have to do anything. I also have a very capable steward."

James Coleridge nodded. Then pierced him with an intelligent gaze. "And your brothers?"

Cameron actually felt a lump in his throat at mention of them. They'd been separated for so long. "As you know I've found one of them, Gabe. Along with his wife. I'm continuing my

search for the others. I believe William may be down in Cornwall, so I have sent runners there to find out."

"Well, I have a mission for you and while you're doing it, it may offer you an opportunity to search for your youngest brother."

Cameron was immediately intrigued. "What do you mean?"

The other man clasped his hands and leaned on his elbows on the desk. "I have knowledge of two French spies coming to Portsmouth."

A growing sense of anticipation was felt. This was what he was meant for—code breaking, dangerous undercover and intelligence gathering work, not dancing with pretty debutantes at balls.

"Do tell me more, James."

"You've heard of Brochand & Fouché?"

Cameron raised a brow. "I believe so. Amongst my travels for the Crown."

"They're coming to England to gather intelligence from certain French engineers studying here."

"Naval and industrial spies?"

"Exactly so. They're landing in Portsmouth, so they'll begin with the naval intelligence. I strongly suspect that their final destination will be London to mix with the political elite of the haut ton."

Cameron rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The engineers would be unable to attend social gatherings of course. Do they have an aristocratic contact?"

If there was a traitor, Cameron wanted to know.

James gave a brief shake of his head. "Not that I'm aware of. It will be part of your role to find out. I believe they will have to coerce or blackmail someone into helping them. Or they may bribe someone, in which case do they have finances available to them?"

Cameron's jaw tightened. "There's bound to be some fool with pockets to let or a gambler they can exploit."

"Well, you'll be following them around, so you can discover all of this for me, including any money trails," the older man said.

Cameron's eyes widened. "Following?"

"Yes. Don't look surprised, Cameron. You're ideally placed for this task. I want you to watch them in Portsmouth, follow them around in various disguises and report back to me. If they

send any correspondence, I want you to intercept it and read it. If it gives away quantities of armaments, I wish for you to downgrade them. And send a replacement. If not too much is given away, you can reseal the letter."

"Yes. Fine." Cameron was used to operating in such a manner. "And if they leave Portsmouth?"

"Send a message back to me, but always follow them. I want to know everywhere they go, who they meet, especially once they are here in London. You can be yourself at social events, as can your co-agent, for you are both already well known amongst the ton and can mix naturally with the political elite, without drawing attention to yourselves."

The sudden mention of a co-agent surprised him. Cameron had always worked alone before. It was less dangerous. "My what?" He couldn't hide his displeasure.

"As one of the spies is female, you may be restricted where you can follow her sometimes. Therefore, you will have a female agent to assist you."

Damn it. Not only did he have someone else's back to watch this time, that someone was female. He looked across the desk at his friend and saw amusement in his eyes.

"I'm glad you're enjoying this, James. If I didn't trust your instinct so much, I'd throttle you."

"Humph." The man grunted. "There are two spies to follow remember. If they split up, you'd be divided over who to follow."

Cameron reluctantly had to agree. He could also see the logic in having a female agent to follow the French woman. Yet, it still didn't sit well with him. "She'd better be good," he muttered.

"Oh, she is," came the quick reassurance.

"And who is she?"

"Lady Arabella Willoughby."

The name meant nothing to him and Cameron couldn't place her. He was appalled. A lady! Someone who couldn't dress without a maid and who would balk at getting her hands dirty. He wasn't being unfair. He'd met some intelligent and lethal female spies in his time. But none had been fine ladies. This couldn't be happening to him.

"Don't look so pained my friend. Despite being a diamond of the first water, Lady Willoughby is a highly intelligent field agent. She is used to wearing disguises, talking dialects and if the occasion warrants it, she can fire a pistol."

Cameron was impressed, he had to admit, especially if the chit could fire a pistol. Perhaps he was wrong to judge her without meeting her. "When do I meet her?" Maybe he could establish a few ground rules with her before they went.

"She's already on her way to Portsmouth. She's going to be working in various disguises at the inn where the spies are expected to be staying."

Blast. She'd left already.

"When am I supposed to join her then?"

"Once I receive word they have arrived. There was no point sending the both of you until they had done so."

Cameron sighed. He wished he had travelled with the lady, so that they could establish a rapport. "Tell me how I'm supposed to recognize her please."

James smiled. "The innkeeper is an ex-agent, Thomas Wilson and he'll be able to tell you what she's currently working as in the inn."

Cameron listened with half an ear. He still couldn't believe this was happening. When his friend had finished describing the beautiful Lady Arabella and the various disguises she might adopt, Cam felt a headache coming on. She sounded like trouble to him. About to excuse himself, he suddenly remembered James mentioning his younger brother.

"You mentioned how I might locate Zac, if indeed that's the name he goes by, thanks to my bitch of a stepmother."

"Ah yes." James reached into a drawer beside him, took some papers and placed them on the desk. He pushed them across to Cameron. "He goes by the name of Zac Montgomery. And he's a pirate."

"A pirate," Cameron spluttered. God, Gabe had been a highwayman, Zac was a pirate. What the hell was his brother William?

James chuckled. "Oh, don't worry. The government turns a blind eye to what your brother gets up to."

"They do?"

"Yes. He only raids foreign ships and reports anything useful to the admiralty."

Cameron felt huge relief. "In his own way, he gathers intelligence."

"Precisely. And I've recently learned that he visits Portsmouth regularly, so you can conduct some enquiries while you're working if you like."

"Thank you, James," Cameron said, although words couldn't adequately express his gratitude. "And I won't let my need to reunite my family compromise the mission."

"I know you won't. Now get out of here do. Pack light."

Cameron laughed, bid his friend farewell and left.

Once outside, he decided against going home and went for a stroll instead. To think. He couldn't help mulling things over. The name, Lady Arabella Willoughby, was familiar now that he concentrated on it. She was Lady Wallace's goddaughter and as a child, she'd come to visit her godmother on the estate next to theirs.

A vague memory stirred. One of a pretty, endearing child wanting to join in their games. Cameron had been eleven at the time and she could only have been what six? Yet, she'd insisted on climbing trees with them – wrinkled her little nose up at playing with dolls, she had. She'd been a good climber too. He'd only helped her up the more difficult branches. He smiled. Fond memories of the last summer spent with his brothers.

His smile slipped. Tragedy had struck later that year. Cameron's mother had died in October and while his father was vulnerable in his grief, his soon to be stepmother had taken her chance. She'd consoled his father and convinced him she could be a mother to his boys. For once, his father behaved rashly and he married the woman a year later.

Cameron clenched his fists. The cold beauty soon changed toward her stepchildren. Unnoticed by servants and their father, she would pinch and slap them at every opportunity. He tried to protect his younger brothers from it as much as possible, but he knew she hated them and wanted them out of the way. To this day he could remember her snarling the words in his ear.

"You brats will be gone soon and my child shall inherit."

At twelve, Cameron had been terrified. Too scared to tell his father what was going on because it was his word against hers. Yet, he never thought his stepmother would go as far as she did.

One day she came to the nursery and was all sweetness with them again. Cameron fell for it—maybe because he wanted to believe she had changed. Either way he went along with her when she informed them they were all going on a picnic by the lake. They never went to the lake. Instead, they were each taken to different places in London and simply left there, while the Marchioness returned home to fake their deaths in a 'boating accident'.

Cameron hadn't seen his brothers from that moment. But he would find them. He'd found Gabe and he would find the others. They would be the four Blakeney brothers once more.